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Rights, ideology and 'new' Russians

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PARIS—As Mikhail Gorbachev, his Paris visit completed, prepares to meet Ronald Reagan in Geneva, it is clear that the change in how the Soviet government addresses the world goes beyond mere public relations. There is a new skill in communication, and a new assurance, but a new uncertainty as well, evident on matters of human rights. For the introduction of human rights questions into the formal relations of nations we have to thank the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

John J. Maresca is the one American diplomat who was part of those negotiations from start to finish, and he has just published a succinct and graceful account of what went on ["To Helsinki," published by Duke University]. As he writes, the novelty of the Final Act was that it introduced the principle that human rights questions are "a legitimate aspect of relations between states and that discussion of human-rights-related issues is therefore not a form of intervention in internal affairs."

The Soviet negotiators seem not to have fully grasped the implications of this when they signed the Final Act. The result has put them on the defensive ever since. They have been steadily and repeatedly challenged on human rights matters in the formal Helsinki review meetings and other international foums, in nongovernmental meetings and the press, and in meetings with Western leaders, as in Paris—where questions on human rights were the one thing that agitated Gorbachev.

The Soviet Union's response to this challenge has changed over the last 10 years. The old bluster and defiance about "hostile provocations" can still be heard, certainly. But Soviet officials increasingly have found it necessary to defend themselves by making reference to the very Western standards that form the basis of the criticisms made of them.

When Gorbachev was interviewed by French television on the eve of his Paris visit, he evaded direct answers to human rights questions by asserting that economic and social "rights" are better defended in Russia than in the West. From lesser figures in the new generation of Russian officials a more plaintive argument increasingly is heard, particularly from those who have worked in and know the West.

These people say that national customs and traditions have to be taken into account in criticizing their country. Abstract Western notions of rights and justice, they say, cannot arbitrarily be imposed on societies with an entirely different history.

There is something in this. Even if the will to reform existed in Moscow, one could not reasonably expect a set of Western conceptions to be taken over wholesale in a society that has never known anything but authoritarian, autocratic government.

The argument these Russians make implicitly concedes the critics' case. In the past, censorship, secrecy, prison or internal exile for dissenters were defiantly said by communists to be essential elements in the discipline of a great revolutionary movement. Now these things are apologetically ascribed to the unfortunate history of a still-backward country, toward which the rest of us should practice tolerance.

It is an argument only indirectly made, to be sure. It comes from the younger and more Westernized Soviet functionaries. These, however, are the people who, under Mikhail Gorbachev, are taking over leadership of the USSR from the old men who knew the heroic age of Lenin and the dark age of Stalin. These new men know the West, liberal ideas, the way the rest of the world works. They perhaps know too much for their own good. We are apparently seeing, for the first time, Soviet intelligence service and diplomatic defectors who act for reasons of conscience.

The old men found legitimacy in their participation in the revolution and the ordeals that followed, the industrial transformation of Russia, its triumphant ventures into space and projection of Soviet power to the open seas and the Third World. The Gorbachev generation are postwar men who have accomplished nothing—yet. They have the force of Russian nationalism behind them, and it is Russian nationalism that they serve. Is there ideological conviction as well? Gorbachev, in his Paris news conference, remarked that ideological divergences shouldn't affect interstate relations "as was the case with medieval fanatics." That is an odd thing for a communist to say, when you think about it.

We are still a long way from seeing an end to ideology in Soviet affairs, but we are not, perhaps, as far from it as we used to be.